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## PORTRAIT OF A LADY: MADAME DE CHOISEUL

All who have read the brilliant and fascinating letters of Madame du Deffand will be interested to know more about Madame de Choiseul. The two were intimate friends, in spite of a considerable difference in age; their lives were intertwined in the closest fashion. At the same time, they present a marked contrast in temperament, character, and habits of thought. Madame du Deffand's estimate of her younger friend, whom she playfully called "grandmamma," will serve well to set the note for a portrayal of the latter: "If there is a perfect being in the world, 'tis she. She has mastered all her passions. No one is at once so sensitive and so completely mistress of herself. Everything is genuine in her, nothing artificial, yet everything is under control."

Elsewhere Madame du Deffand points out that if Madame de Choiseul was perfect, she had everything to make her so,—family, fortune, friends, and social position. "I know no one who has been so continuously and so completely fortunate as you." In a sense this was exact. Madame de Choiseul from birth filled a high position in the social life of the French mid-eighteenth century. She married early a man of the greatest distinction and charm, who came to occupy the most important political offices, and for a time she was perhaps the leading lady of France, next the queen—and the king's mistress. But her life was not all roses, by any means. Her husband was charming to others as well as to her. She had no children. Politics brought her misery as well as fortune, since the duke lost his office and was sent in disgrace and banishment from court. Later he died and she was left alone to face the Revolution, which she did with the splendid patience and courage shown by so many women of her class. But this was long after Madame du Deffand had exchanged the ennui of earth for the felicity of heaven.

During the time she held a leading social position, Madame de Choiseul proved to be in every way fitted for it. She herself declares she has no preference for such a life, complains that her hours are filled, not occupied, longs for solitude and quiet, and

when they come with political failure, accepts them with a sigh of genuine relief.

But all agree that for the manifold uses of society she had a singular aptness and charm. She was married when she was fifteen, and at eighteen went as the wife of the ambassador to Rome, where she made herself beloved by everyone. She was not perhaps regularly beautiful, but her little figure had a fairy-like grace and lightness, and her simple, dainty speech and manners doubled the attraction of her figure. "A Venus in little," *Vénus en abrégé*, Voltaire calls her. Horace Walpole, who to be sure loved all the friends of Madame du Deffand, says of the duchess: "Oh, it is the gentlest, amiable, civil, little creature that ever came out of a fairy egg! So just in its phrases and thoughts, so attentive and good-natured!" Elsewhere he is even more enthusiastic, "She has more sense and more virtues than almost any human being," and another brief touch gives a climax quite unusual with the cynic of Strawberry Hill: "The most perfect being I know of either sex."

Nor was this grace and perfection of the tame order which effaces itself and merely warms others till they sparkle and flame. The lady had a fairy's vivacity as well as a fairy's daintiness. It is true, social embarrassment sometimes overcame her—most winningly. "She has," says Walpole further, "a hesitation and modesty, the latter of which the court has not cured, and the former of which is atoned for by the most interesting sound of voice, and forgotten in the most elegant turn and propriety of expression." She herself gives a charming account of a critical social situation in which she was utterly at a loss what to do or say and could only stammeringly repeat the words of others, "Yes, Madam; no, madam,—I think, that is I believe—oh, yes, I am sure I agree with you entirely."

But she had wit of her own, spirit of her own, courage of her own, and could find words in plenty when occasion really called for them. Madame du Deffand has preserved many of her clever sayings, as the comment on two gentlemen equally amiable, but different: "One is charming for the manner that he has and the other for the manner that he has not."

The lasting evidence for us, however, of Madame de Choiseul's

vivacity is her letters. They exist in no such number as Madame du Deffand's or Madame de Sévigné's, but they yield to neither in ease, in variety, in grace and swiftness of expression. These qualities are equally manifest in her long description of the busy day of a prime minister's wife,—the scores of petitioners, the hurry from one function to another, the tedious necessity of being something to everybody while nobody is anything to you—and in little touches of the most pregnant and delicate simplicity. "What is there to say in the country when you are alone and it rains? We were alone and it was raining. This suggested talk of ourselves and, after all, what is there that we know so much about?" Or again, "To love and to please is to be always young." She could and did write French as perfect as Voltaire's. But she did not hesitate a moment to twist grammar or syntax, when some unusual turn of thought required it. "I propose to speak my own tongue before that of my nation;" she says, "and it is often the irregularity of our thoughts that causes the irregularity of our expressions."

But it was neither her beauty nor her wit that made the duchess so much admired and beloved. It was her sympathy and tenderness, her faculty of entering into the joys and sorrows of others and her pleasure in doing so that drew all hearts to her. "She had the art of listening and of making others shine," says a memoir-writer of her own day. This is a social quality by no means contemptible. But Madame de Choiseul's amiability served for much more than a social purpose. "I cannot bear the idea of suffering, even for persons indifferent to me," she writes. This did not mean, however, that she fled suffering, but that she endeavored to alleviate it, by every means in her power. Where the suffering was mental or imaginary, she soothed and diverted it by sound counsel and gentle rallying, if necessary. Where it was physical, she gave her time and thought and strength to substantial relief.

Her dependents, her servants, the poor in all the region round, adored her. She gave them money, she gave them food, she gave them the sunshine of her presence and her cheerfulness. A servant whose work had been about the house was offered a better position outside. He refused it. "But why," urged the

duchess, "why? Your pay will be better, your hours shorter, your work lighter." "Yes, madame, but I shall not be near you." After the Revolution, when she had lost everything and was living in a garret, there came one day a knock at the door. She opened it to a rather prosperous-looking mechanic, and inquired what he wanted. "Madame, when I was a poor peasant, working on the roads, you asked me what I desired most in the world. I said, a cart and an ass to draw it. You gave them to me and I have made a comfortable fortune. Now it is all yours."

If she was thus kind to those who were nothing to her personally, it may well be supposed that she was devoted to her friends. She had many of them and never felt that she had enough. Like all persons of such ample affection, she had her disappointments, with resulting cynicism, and once wrote: "It is well to love even a dog when you have the opportunity, for fear you should find nothing else worth loving." But in general, though she was far from indiscriminate in her choice, she loved widely, and she repeats again and again that love is the only thing that makes life worth living, that love is life. When the bitter saying of Madame de Staal de Launay is reported to her, that she was always glad to make new acquaintances because she felt sure they could not be worse than those she had already, Madame de Choiseul rebels with the utmost indignation, declaring that she is not dissatisfied with any of her acquaintances and that she is enchanted with her friends. It seems, also, that her friendship was to a singular degree sympathetic and self-forgetful. So many of us see our friends' lives from the point of view of our own and enter into their interests chiefly so far as they are identical with ours. But this lady has one beautiful and perfect word on the subject: "I have always had the vanity of those I love, that is fashion of my loving."

One of her friendships we can study in minute detail, and we find it to be without fault or flaw, that for Madame du Deffand. One friend was young, rich, beautiful, popular, driven in the rush and hurry of the great world. The other was old, feeble, blind, forlorn. Yet the friendship was as genuine and heartfelt on one side as on the other. Madame de Choiseul had the discernment to see Madame du Deffand's fine qualities, her clear head, her

tender heart, her magnificent sincerity; but she cherished her, as love does cherish, not from a mathematical calculation of fine qualities, but simply because it does and must. I love you, she repeats, I love you. I think of you daily, hourly. Tell me everything, as I tell you everything. Let there be no secrets and no shadows between us.

Nor was it by any means an untested friendship. Madame du Deffand had nothing to do but think of trouble, she was critically sensitive, knew her own weaknesses, and could not believe that anybody loved her. Often she intimates her complaints, her dissatisfaction, her jealousy. Madame de Choiseul is sometimes forced to treat her like the child she calls her. There are moments when a frank, outspoken word is necessary. But it is spoken with heavenly gentleness. "You think I love you from complaisance and ask you to visit me from politeness. I don't. I love you because I love you. I will not say because you are lovable; for your fears, your doubts, your absurd hesitations annoy me too much for compliments. I don't care about doing you justice. I want to do justice to myself. I love you because you love me, because I have my own interests at heart, and because I am absolutely sure of you. . . . I want to see you, because I love you, right or wrong." And she did love her, in spite of all criticism and difficulty, with patient tenderness, thoughtful devotion, and infinite solicitude, till the very end.

Another friendship, of a somewhat different character but of almost equal interest, is that for Abbé Barthélemy, the clever, brilliant, sensitive scholar who was dependent upon the duchess's bounty during a great part of his life. Here again, in the Abbé's enthusiastic descriptions and comments, we see the thoughtful kindness, the unselfish devotion, the unobtrusive sympathy which Madame de Choiseul lavished on those whom she had taken into her heart.

Sometimes this tenderness got her into difficulties. She added a child, apt and skilled in music, to her household, and made a pet of him. As he grew older, the boy fell in love with her, and she did not know what to do about it. Her pathetic account of her attempts to reason with him should be read in the original to be appreciated: "He could eat nothing, he could attend to

nothing, and one day I found him seated at the clavichord, his heart overflowing in pitiful sighs. I called him 'my sweet child,' to pet him and comfort him a little. Then his heart failed him and his tears flowed abundantly. Through a thousand sobs I could make out that he reproached me for calling him 'my sweet child,' when I didn't love him and wouldn't let him love me. . . . My courage broke too, I cried as much as he did, and to hide my tears I ran to find Monsieur de Choiseul and told him the whole story."

Some gossips attempted to see in this pretty incident a suggestion, or at any rate a parallel, to the adventures of the page, Cherubino, in Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro*, written at a somewhat later date. Such slander was utterly unfounded. It is not the least of Madame de Choiseul's charm, that in an age when to have only one lover at a time was virtue and to have many was hardly vice, she is absolutely above the suspicion of having had any lovers at all. No doubt she knew that she was charming and liked to be admired. Madame du Deffand was perfectly right in reproaching Walpole for the singular lack of tact implied in his compliment to the duchess's virtue. "Why did you tell her," she exclaimed, "that a man would never think of falling in love with her? No woman under forty likes to be praised in that fashion." But she herself declared that she was something of a prude, and the testimony of many besides Walpole proves conclusively that she was not the opposite.

Moreover, she had the best of guarantees against waywardness of the affections—a profound, enduring, and self-forgetful love for her husband. Walpole cynically suggests that this love was too obtrusive to be sincere. In Walpole's world such obtrusiveness may not have been fashionable. "My grandmamma has the ridiculous foible of being in love," says Madame du Deffand. Some may not find it so ridiculous. At any rate, to the duchess her husband was the most important figure in the world, and the obvious delight with which she welcomes political banishment because it means solitude and seclusion with him is as charming as it is pathetic.

Pathetic, because she did not get the same devotion in return. The duke loved her, respected her, admired her. His serious

words about her are worthy of him and her both: "Her virtues, her attractions, her love for me and mine for her, have brought to our union a happiness far beyond the gifts of fortune." But, though a prime minister, the duke was not always serious, in fact, too seldom. He was a brilliant, versatile, gay, and amorous Frenchman, and while he loved his wife, which was a merit, he loved many other ladies, which was less so. "He does not mean to go without anything,"—writes the duchess to Madame du Deffand, in a moment of unusual frankness. "He lets no pleasure escape him. He is right in thinking that pleasure is a legitimate end, but not every one is satisfied with pleasures that come so easily as his. Some of us cannot get them for merely stooping to pick them up."

Yet with all his weaknesses it cannot be said that the passionate lover had chosen a wholly unworthy object, and even if she had, the breadth, the intensity, the nobility of her passion would have gone far to justify it. How tactful she is, with all her longing for affection! She does not intrude her feelings at the wrong place or time. She thinks more of giving than of getting. How exquisitely tender are the gleams we get, often through others, of the devotion which showed itself in a hundred little forms of the desire to please. "Your grandmamma is at the clavichord," writes Barthélemy, with playful exaggeration, "and will remain there till dinner time. She will go at it again at seven and play till eleven. She has been doing this for two months, with infinite pleasure. Her sole object is to get so she can play to the duke without nervousness. To accomplish that result will take her about fourteen years longer, and she will be perfectly satisfied if at fifty she can play two or three pieces without a slip."

Her own words are even more significant: "I want to grow young again and pretty, if I could. At any rate, I should like to make your grandpapa think I am both one and the other, and as he has little here to compare with me, I may be able to deceive him." Again, in as charming a bit of self-revelation as it would be easy to find, she writes to Madame du Deffand, with a lover's passionate urgency: "Tell me, dear grandchild, did your grandpapa come back again Wednesday, after he had put me



into the carriage? Did he speak of me? What did he say and how did he say it? I can't help thinking that he grows a little less ashamed of me, and it is a great point gained when we no longer mortify those whom we would have loved us. . . . You must admit that your grandpapa is the best of men; but that is not all, I assure you he is the greatest man the age has produced."

If he was not, at least she did her best to make him so. While he was minister, she pulled every wire a loving woman can pull honestly, even stooping to court and caress Madame de Pompadour, mistress of the king. When he was disgraced, she cherished his friends and fought his enemies, minimized his faults and blazoned his virtues, believed in him so intensely that she made others believe who were much more ready to doubt. After his death, she sold her possessions and lived in poverty to pay his debts and clear his memory. When she was urged to flee during the Revolution, she said she could not, or those debts would never be paid; and when she was imprisoned and in danger of the guillotine, her plea for release was still that she had a task to do on earth that was not done. She was set free, and continued her efforts till her death.

It will be asked if this charming personage had no faults. Of course she had. She realized them herself, and so did others. It was even maintained that her very faultlessness was an imperfection and that she overcame nature so completely as to be not quite human enough. The Abbé Barthélemy himself, loyal and devoted as he was, and protesting that he is a monster of ingratitude, whispers gently to Madame du Deffand that his patroness had serious defects,—to be sure chiefly injurious to herself,—which resulted from her very excess of virtue, sympathy, and self-control. Elsewhere he murmurs that she is so busy with everybody that it is sometimes hard to realize that she cares for anybody, and again that she thinks so much of friends who are absent that those who are present get very little attention.

Madame du Deffand, who was lonely, sensitive, and jealous, is much more free in her criticism. Persons overflowing with sympathy and kindness, like Madame de Choiseul, are always exposed to the charge of insincerity, and the older friend ex-

presses this, in the early days of their acquaintance, with the utmost bitterness. "She makes a great show of friendship. And as she has none for me and I have none for her, it is perfectly natural that we should say the tenderest things possible to one another."

The passage of years wholly corrected this misapprehension. The blind, forlorn, love-thirsty dreamer came to know that there was no love in the world more loyal, more tender, more self-forgetful than that of this wonderful lady who might have had princes at her feet. Yet the solitary heart is not contented, can never be contented. Soothing, petting, rallying may calm it for the moment. It will never be still. "You cannot let go in your letters. You always say just what you want to say." She writes grumblingly to Walpole of the duchess: "She wants to be perfect. That is her defect." And again, "It is vexatious that she is an angel. I had rather she were a woman." The sum total of the complaint recurs again and again in a phrase which Madame de Choiseul had most unfortunately invented herself: "You know you love me, but you do not feel it."

Yet, after all, the lady was not so fatally angelic as to lose every appeal to frail humanity. It stung her to be dependent. It stung her to ask a favor of an enemy. It stung her to have any one ask a favor for her. With what wholesome vigor does she lash Madame du Deffand, who had innocently spoken a kind word for her friend to the wife of her friend's chief political antagonist: "This is something I will not allow. This is something you absolutely must make right, and in the presence of the very persons who were witnesses to a piece of cajolery so unfitting under existing circumstances and so utterly foreign to my character." And she adds, "the Abbé, who is all for gentle methods, will try to smooth this over. But, for my part, though I am sorry to hurt you, I don't retract a word, because I have said what I feel."

Also, she was capable of good honest hatred, when she thought there was occasion for it, and right in the family too. Her husband had a sister, Madame de Grammont, a big, haughty Juno, if the duchess was a little Venus, and between the two there was no friendship. The duke hearkened to the sister much

more than the wife liked. In short, they were jealous of each other, and though they finally patched up an armed truce which age developed into a reconciliation, they never regarded each other with much cordiality. How vividly human is Madame de Choiseul's account of her conduct when the duke had an attack of illness: "Though I hate Madame de Grammont, I sent her word, because I should wish her to do the same to me. What happened? She never thanked me, she never even answered me, but wrote to the duke to complain that he had not written, and thus got me into trouble."

So, you see, she knew the bitter emotions of life as well as the sweet, and was by no means exempt from any aspect of human frailty. Yet though her soul was wide-open to emotions of all sorts, and though she herself passionately repeated that feeling was the only good of existence, was the whole of existence, she had, beside her emotions, an intellectual life singularly subtle, plastic, and varied, and full of interest to the curious student. She was apt to condemn reason as misleading, deceptive, and of little worth, but in demonstrating the point she indulged herself in reasoning of a highly elaborate and ingenious order. In fact, she was a child of the eighteenth century, and could not wholly escape its abstract tendencies. Speaking of her own letters, when a friend wanted to collect them for publication, she said: "To me they seem to be the writing of a *raisonneuse*."

She came naturally by this argumentative tendency, for it was said of her father that he was too inclined to dissect his ideas and had a leaning toward metaphysics which he communicated to his wife, so that the daughter's cradle may have been rocked by tempests of theoretical discussion. She herself declares that she was not educated at all and thanks heaven for it. For, she says, at least she was not taught the errors of others: "If I have learned anything, I owe it neither to precepts nor to books, but to a few opportune misfortunes. Perhaps the school of misfortune is the very best." She had, however, picked up a rather broad learning through keen attention and a love of books. She speaks of Pliny, Horace, Cicero, and other Latin authors, as if she knew them by heart. She reads the Memoirs of Sully with delight,—though chiefly why? Because Sully's situation

reminds her of Monsieur de Choiseul's. She deplores Madame du Deffand's indifference to reading: "Books help us to endure ignorance and life itself: life, because the knowledge of past wretchedness helps us to endure the present; ignorance, because history tells us nothing but what we already know." Here you see the touch of the *raisonneuse*, to use her own phrase, the curious analyst, the minute dissector of her own motives and those of others. Madame du Deffand quotes a German admirer as saying of the duchess: "She is reason masquerading as an angel and having the power to persuade with charm."

It is most fruitful to follow the gleaming thread of Madame de Choiseul's analysis through the different concerns and aspects of human life.

Of art she apparently knew nothing whatever. Though herself a figure just stepped out of a canvas of Watteau, she never mentions him, nor any other artist, greater or lesser. We do not see that plastic beauty existed for her at all. Of her music we know only that she practised day and night to please her husband, not herself. Nature she never mentions in any aspect. All that she has to say of her long years in the country is that solitude is restful.

On the other hand, she shows much of herself and of her own mind in what she says of literature. As we have seen, she was a good deal of a reader, would have read much more, or fancied she would, if she had not had a thousand other things to do. And her judgment of books and authors is as keen and penetrating as it is independent. It shows, further, the strong, sound, moral bent of her disposition. She pierces Rousseau's extravagant theorizing about nature with swift thrusts of practical sense, summing up her verdict in a touch of common truth expressed inimitably: "Let us beware of metaphysics applied to simple things." And Rousseau himself she defined with bitter accuracy: "He has always seemed to me to be a charlatan of virtue." Voltaire she judged with a singular breadth and justice of perception, appreciating to the full his greatness and his pettiness. "He tells us he is faithful to his enthusiasms; he should have said to his weaknesses. He has always been cowardly where there was no danger, insolent where there was

no motive, and mean where there was no object in being so. All which does not prevent his being the most brilliant mind of the century. We should admire his talent, study his works, profit by his philosophy, and be broadened by his teaching. We should adore him and despise him, as is indeed the case with a good many objects of worship."

This passage alone would show that we are dealing with a vigorous and independent mind. The impression is by no means diminished when we read the duchess's other outpourings on abstract subjects. Some indeed think that she overdoes the matter, that she had caught the pernicious eighteenth-century habit of moral declamation; in short, that she violated her own excellent precept about applying metaphysics to simple things. But her sight was so clear, her sympathy so tender, and her heart so sound, that I do not think anyone can seriously accuse her of being a rhetorician.

It is, however, very curious to compare her in this respect with Madame du Deffand, who takes no interest in general questions, and is disposed to leave politics to princes, religion to priests, and the progress of mankind to those who can still believe in it.

Not so Madame de Choiseul. She thinks passionately on the great problems of life and history and follows with keen interest the thinking of others. When Voltaire sets himself up as the apologist of Catherine II of Russia, the duchess's sense of right is outraged and in a strange long letter to Madame du Deffand she analyzes Catherine's career, and with it the whole theory of political and social morals. When Rousseau is under discussion, she analyzes carefully the tissue and fabric of organized community life. When forms of government attract her pen, she analyzes monarchy and democracy and expresses a sympathy with the latter surprisingly significant for her age and class. When her analyzing appetite can find no other bone to gnaw on, she analyzes her own happiness, with the subtlety of Labruyère. Perhaps the following is a little too much an application of metaphysics to simple things: "Gayety, even when it is habitual, seems to me only an accident. Happiness is the fruit of reason, a tranquil condition, and an enduring one, which knows neither

transport nor ecstasy. Perhaps it is a slumber of the soul, death, nothingness. As to that I cannot say, but by these words I mean nothing sad, though people commonly think of them as lugubrious."

In all these elaborate analyses it is noticeable that there is no trace whatever of religion. Madame de Choiseul was as completely skeptical as Madame du Deffand. In all their correspondence God is hardly mentioned, even in the light, intimate way so common with the French. Madame de Choiseul declares her uncertainty with perfect frankness: "My skepticism has grown so great that it falls over backward and from doubting everything I have become ready to believe everything. For instance, I believe just as much in Blue Beard, the Thousand and One Nights, genii, fairies, sorcerers, and will-o-the-wisps, as in—what shall I say? anything you please." Nor is her faith in human nature in the abstract any more stable, as soon as she subjects it to the cold ray of her analyzing intellect: "Let us say once for all that there are few people whom one can count on, a melancholy truth that chills the heart and withers the confidence of youth. We grow old as soon as we cease to love and trust." While her summing up of the acme of possible good wishes is, to say the least, not of a very spiritual tenor: "Good-by, dear child, I wish you good sleep and a good digestion. I don't know anything better to desire for those I love."

What is deeply important and significant for the study of Madame de Choiseul in this lack of positive belief, is that on a substructure apparently so frail there could be built up a character so rounded, so pure, so delicate, so eminently self-forgetful and devoted. And it is to be observed that her perfection was not all the result of a happy, contented, optimistic temperament. She was not born entirely a saint, nor quite ignorant of the perversities of frail humanity. She herself says: "With a warm heart which longed for affection and a quick imagination which must be ever at work, I was more disposed to unhappiness and ennui than people usually are. Yet I am happy and ennui gets no hold on me." In other pages she makes it evident that she had her troubles, many of them. Physically, she was delicate and sensitive, always ailing, and it is a charming bit of human

nature that with all her splendid self-control she could not refrain from eating things that disagreed with her, so that Barthélemy complains that she had the courage of a lion in great matters and was a coward in little. Also, the seeds of spiritual complaints were manifestly latent in her and she had her dark hours when sadness and anxiety and regret threatened to assert themselves with irresistible vigor. She speaks somewhere, as the years roll on, of "the terror which seizes me and the disgust which overpowers me when I see the work of destruction advancing and that resistance is no longer equal to attack."

But to all these subtle dangers she opposed a superb strength of will, a splendid courage, and above all the instinctive, unconquerable, eternal energy of love. While she was doing something for others she was happy, and for others there was always something to be done. It is a most satisfying and tranquillizing thing to see a creature so dainty, so exquisite, so finely tempered, with all the delicate responsiveness we now-a-days call nerves, at the same time steeled and toughened by that substantial necessity, common sense. She knew all the good of life and all the evil. Beauty, rank, wealth, love, honor, exile, ruin, and disaster were all hers. And through them all she remained the same simple, gentle, loyal, heroic figure, admirable if a woman ever was, and memorable if the highest charm backed by the strongest character is indeed worth remembering.

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